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AUTHOR Rest, James R.
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ABSTRACT

Findings from research studies that use the Defining Issues Test (DIT), a test of moral judgment development, are described. These findings are relevant to three major questions in higher education research: (1) the question of student outcomes (i.e., what does college experience do for and to people?); (2) the question of the relevance and usefulness of test scores in college in predicting behavior in the "real world" outside the classroom; and (3) the question of admissions criteria--what student characteristics should be used for admissions decisions. Of concern is the diversity of studies and their claims. Findings related to student outcomes are considered that concern: changes during college, attributing change to the college experience, and factors in the college environment responsible for the change. Also considered are what a DIT score predicts beyond itself, and the use of DIT for admissions. Included are five references. (SW)

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MORAL JUDGMENT: AN INTERESTING VARIABLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

James R. Rest, University of Minnesota

(Paper for the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Baltimore, Maryland, November 21, 1987)

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Texas A&M University
Department of Educational
Administration
College Station, TX 77843
(409) 845-0393

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MORAL JUDGMENT:
AN INTERESTING VARIABLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

James R. Rest, University of Minnesota

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I am going to briefly describe some findings from research studies using the Defining Issues Test -- a test of moral judgment development. These findings are relevant to three major questions in higher education research: (1) the question of student outcomes --that is, what does college experience do for and to people?; (2) the question of the relevance and usefulness of test scores in college in predicting behavior in the "real world" outside the classroom; and (3) the question of admissions criteria --what student characteristics should be used for admissions decisions.

Here I will not be arguing on theoretical grounds that morality deserves attention because the tradition of liberal education says so, or that a concept of the whole person demands consideration of moral development. Rather I intend to point to some interesting findings from moral judgment research that say something about some interesting questions in higher education research.

Given the short time that I have and the territory that I wish to cover, in this presentation I will not be going into sufficient detail that will enable you to evaluate the studies. My goal is really to call your attention to the diversity of studies and their major claims. Then, if this catches your interest, you can follow up the references. (Most of the studies are reviewed in a book that eight colleagues and I recently published, and that book is cited in the handouts; Rest, et al, 1986.)

Findings related to STUDENT OUTCOMES

Changes during college. First, there are many studies that compare the DIT scores of subjects at different levels of education. These are cross-sectional studies of different groups of students and adults with different levels of education. A secondary analysis was done in 1979 on over 5000 subjects, and another secondary analysis was done in 1987 and they say essentially the same thing: formal education is a powerful correlate of DIT scores. Approximately 40 to 50% of the variance in DIT scores can be attributed to education. Furthermore, education is much more strongly associated with DIT scores than chronological age, itself. In fact in several studies of adults, age by itself has a very little correlation with moral judgment. (Incidently sex differences on the DIT are trivial, accounting

for less than 1/2 of 1% of the variance.)

Second, a dozen longitudinal studies have been completed, shown in Table 1. The same subjects are followed up over time -- in these studies, the followup interval is from 2 years to 8 years. As can be seen, there is generally quite significant change in college.

Among these studies you might note the study by Mentkowski and Strait of students at Alverno College. Evaluation at Alverno College is not known for its use of standardized, multiple-choice tests, but in terms of data trends, the DIT gave Alverno some of its biggest gains from freshman to senior.

Attributing change to the college experience. So it is pretty clear that there are upward changes on the DIT during the college years, but what do these changes mean, and how can we attribute the changes to the causal effects of the college experience? One of the usual ways that this is argued is to compare the developmental tracks of college students with non college students.

Figure 1 shows the results of a 10 year longitudinal study of 102 subjects with varying amounts of college experience. The "high" group had 4 years or more of college, the "moderate" group had 2 or 3 years of college, and the low group had no college or less than 2 years. The figure shows that the high group continued to increase in DIT score, and the other groups leveled off or fell off in DIT score over the 10 year period. The simple correlation between years of college and DIT scores in young adulthood is .51. Adjusting for initial differences on the DIT in high school, education accounts for 12.3% of the variance of DIT in young adulthood above and beyond that accounted for by high school DIT scores.

A second way that it is argued that changes are attributable to the college experience is to contast highly involved students with students with low involvement in college. Two recent dissertations have produced some results relevant here (Spickelmier, 1983; and Deemer, 1987). These two studies classified students in terms of "Academic Orientation." In brief, students with high ratings on "Academic Orientation" where those who worked hard at their studies, set academic goals, evidenced pleasure in engaging ideas and learning, and who sought others who took academics seriously. A low rating was given to students spent a lot of time on non-academic matters and little time studying, who chose friends who were also non-academic, and were confused about their academic goals. A regression analysis indicated that after accounting for initial DIT scores in high school, Academic Orientation accounts for 12.6% of the variance of DIT scores in young adulthood. In addition, partialling out the variable, years of college, Academic Orientation accounts for 8.6% of the variance in DIT scores in young adulthood. And so students who are more engaged in the academic business of college change more than students not so engaged--even when years of

schooling are equated.

Factors in the college environment responsible for the change. If college is having this effect, what more specifically about the college experience is causing these changes?

First, deliberate moral education programs have shown that they can produce significant change. A meta-analysis of 56 studies of the effects of moral education upon DIT scores was recently published. Table 2 shows some data from that analysis. The moral education programs were divided into four types, and Table 2 shows that the first two types ("Dilemma discussion" and "Personality development" produced larger effect sizes than control groups. But in saying that deliberate moral education programs are effective does not explain the effects of college because most college students do not ever take a moral education course and yet still show significant upward change. In fact, the average amount of change in 4 years of college is greater than the average amount of change from taking a moral education course. So there must be something else going on in college to produce the effects in moral judgment.

A likely place to look is in the formal curriculum. Table 3 shows how various professional groups and academic groups have scored on the DIT. We see that students in moral philosophy and political science have the highest DIT scores of any other group. That moral philosophers score higher on a test of moral judgment is not too surprising. However after that observation, the professional groups are not ordered in a tidy way. Of course we should not press this data too much since the data do not come from truly representative national samples. But other data beyond that shown in this table also indicate that there is not a simple relationship between professional training or academic major and DIT scores. Several studies have looked at differences between college majors (for instance, between Arts & Sciences students and engineering students) and find no consistent differences (see review in Rest, 1986). So far, differences in the formal curriculum do not seem to account for the impact of college experience upon moral judgment.

Researchers have been looking for the effective influences in various parts of the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and extra curricular activities. About a dozen studies have sought to link moral judgment development to such things as campus activities, travel, religious experiences, debates and dorm discussions, political work, real-world responsibilities, tragedy, meeting different people--and so on. Findings have tended to be weak and inconsistent from such studies of such factors. But recently, a different approach has produced a way of characterizing experience that accounts for much more variance. Instead of characterizing experience in terms of many specific events, experience is characterized in broad terms, such as overall amount of "intellectual stimulation" and "educational orientation." These experience codes account for 48% of the

variance of DIT scores in young adulthood. When we partial out High School DIT scores, these experience codes account for 26% of the later DIT scores. If we further partial out years of education, the experience codes still account for 18% of the variance of later DIT scores. (See Deemer, 1987 and Rest, 1986.)

Predicting Beyond Test Scores

Let us suppose college experiences do increase DIT scores. So what? That is, what does a DIT score predict to beyond itself?

Over two dozen studies relating DIT scores to behavior are reviewed in the 1986 book, and also about two dozen studies relating DIT scores to various attitudes. In general, the correlations are significant, often in the .3 to .4 range for the behavior studies and a little higher in the attitude studies.

One of the more interesting studies to this group is by Sheehan (1980) who found that DIT scores predict to clinical performance ratings of medical doctors. Recently I heard there was a replication of this study at Duke medical school (personal communication, 1987).

In our 10 year longitudinal study, we also are finding that DIT scores relate to significant real life behaviors. In young adulthood, DIT scores predict to "Career Fulfillment" (r=.43), to civic responsibility (r=.45), and to political interest and awareness (r=.52), and to the Duncan score of occupational status (r=.39).

Use of DIT for Admissions

Again, in our longitudinal study we have some interesting findings. DIT scores in high school predict to educational orientation in college at 0.47. DIT scores in high school also predict .47 to the number of years that students stay in college; also DIT scores in high school predict to eventual career attainment (r=.36 with Duncan Index). What we do not have in these studies are the usual measures of higher education research: namely, high school rank, SAT or ACT scores, nor GPA in college. It would be interesting to see if high school DIT when added to high school rank and standardized test scores increases predictability to various measures of college success.

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This has been a very quick run through a lot of findings. My main purpose has been to call attention to a set of findings about the DIT that makes it an interesting variable for further research in higher education. Specific studies are cited in the review of literature put together by eight of us at the Center at

Minnesota (Rest, et al, 1986).

The DIT is a multiple choice, group administrable test that is now available on optical scan forms and is scored by computer. It takes about 35 minutes to take the full six story form (a three story form is also available) and presupposes a 12 year old reading level.

I have focused on the DIT -- the Defining Issues Test. While this is provincial and self-serving, there are some reasons for not giving equal billing to Perry's test (or the Reflective Judgment Interview) nor to Kohlberg's Test of moral judgment. For one, Perry's test -- and certainly the RJI -- does not measure morality or moral judgment. It has little to do with how people respond to or define their responsibilities to others. Certainly Kitchener and King do not regard the RJI as measuring morality. Secondly, Kohlberg's test is the progenitor of the DIT--but scores on it tend to have very little variance once people are beyond puberty; furthermore, the data trends have been much less consistent or strong with the Kohlberg measure than with the DIT; and the data base on the Kohlberg test is small on college subjects compared to the DIT.

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Table 1 Review of longitudinal studies

Author, date (length of study)	Sample characteristics	n	Mean at time of testing T1	T2	T3	T4	Test statistic		Probability
Kitchner et al. (1984) (2 years)	Junior high school	16	43.34	46.93	–	–	$F(1,106) = 4.92$ Time		$p = 0.05$
	Junior college	26	44.61	49.51	–	–	$F(2,106) = 20.85$ Group		$p = 0.001$
	Graduate school	14	60.54	69.98	–	–			
Bridges and Priest (1983) (5 years)	West Point Cadets								
	Sample 1	24	–	38.3	39.8	41.5	$F = 0.6$		
	Sample 2	37	33.0	–	37.8	41.8	$F = 5.8$		$p < .05$
	Sample 3	17	32.6	–	–	41.4	$F = 2.5$		
	Sample 4	113	36.7	38.5	41.3	–	$F = 9.2$		$p < 0.05$
	Sample 5	27	34.9	35.3	40.8	45.9	$F = 5.8$		$p < 0.05$
Mentkowski and Strait (1983) (4 years)	College students	140	39.24	46.61	48.94	–	$t = 40.79$	T1-T2	$p = 0.001$
							$t = 4.48$	T2-T3	$p = 0.05$
McGeorge (1976) (2 years)	College students	93	42.7	44.2	–	–	NA		NS
Rest et al. (1978) (8 years)	Mixed education Age 13-23	41	36.5	47.5	49.8	51.3	$F = 17.6$		$p = 0.0001$
Kraack (1985) (2 years)		117	22.5	28.4	–	–	$t = 6.19$		$p = 0.00$
Spickelmier (1983) (6 years)	College students	24	42.46	48.09	46.80	–	$t = 1.048$		$p = NS$
Thoma (1983) (1 year)	College freshmen	44	45.34	50.35	–	–	$t = 5.92$		$p = 0.02$
Whiteley (1982)	College students	187	38.12	42.20	–	–	$t = 15.88$		$p = 0.001$
Sheehan, Husted, and Candee (1981) (3 years)	Medical students	52	53.7	58.0	–	–	$t = 6.4$		$p = 0.02$
Biggs and Barnett (1981) (4 years)	College students	82	38.60	48.03	–	–	NA		$p = 0.001$
Broadhurst (1980)	Social workers	52	43.54	47.36	50.56	–	$t = 2.82$		$p = 0.01$

NA, not available; NS, not significant.
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Figure 1 Longitudinal mean DIT by education

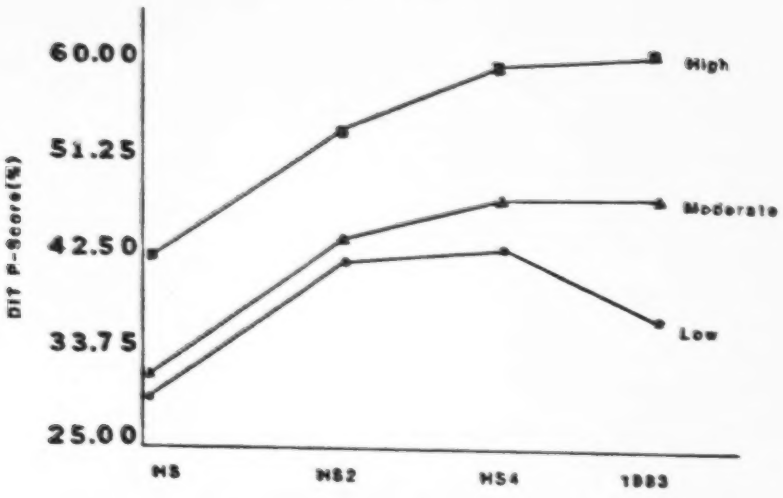

Table 2 Effects of different types of treatments

Treatment type	Number of samples	Effect sizes	95% C.I.
Dilemma discussion			
E_1	23	.41	(.28 < *d* < .56)
C	17	.09	(-.11 < *d* < .28)
Personality development			
E_1	38	.36	(.20 < *d* < .52)
C	17	.09	(-.09 < *d* < .27)
Academic courses			
E_1	9	.09	(-.09 < *d* < .27)
C	7	.16	(-.11 < *d* < .43)
Short-term			
E_1	15	.09	(-.15 < *d* < .33)
C	3	-.11	(-.74 < *d* < .52)

Table 3

AVERAGE P% SCORES ON THE DIT FOR VARIOUS GROUPS

65.2 Moral philosophy and political science grad students
59.8 Liberal protestant seminarians
52.2 Law students
50.2 Medical students
49.2 Practicing physicians
47.6 First year dental students
46.3 Staff nurses
42.8 Grad students in business
42.3 College students in general
41.6 Navy enlisted men
40.0 Adults in general
31.8 Senior high school students
23.5 Prison inmates
21.9 Junior high school students
18.9 Institutionalized delinquents